

Dynamic Risks & Protective Factors

An examination of changes in violence risk estimates

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Introduction

- As psychologists working for the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH), we are tasked with assessing an inmate's violence potential.
- *Historic/static factors*, those that are relatively unchanging, are often considered and weighed as part of these assessments.
- These static factors facilitate comparisons across a known group of individuals (e.g., sexual offenders) and inform estimates of long-term risk – but they represent only one piece of the puzzle.

Objectives

- Static factors, if considered alone, leave little room for change in risk over the course of an individual's life span.
- To be maximally effective in estimating an inmate's violence potential, we must also assess *dynamic factors* that have been associated with changes in the probability of violence recidivism.
- The focus of today's presentation is this dynamic aspect of risk assessment, which reflects one goal of FAD psychologists' work (i.e., what has changed for this individual since the time of the commitment offense).

Topics to be Addressed

- Limitations of static risk factors
- Defining dynamic risk and identifying the factors most associated with violence and its persistence
- Discussion of protective factors and how they differ from dynamic factors
- Challenges in dynamic risk assessment
- Theories related to the causality of dynamic factors
- Overview of relevant research with life-term inmates

Limitations in Static Risk

- Generally one-sided “risk-only” evaluations
 - Rogers (2000) called these types of evaluations “implicitly biased,” noting that they could be unfair and/or unbalanced.
 - If scores on actuarial risk instruments do change, the range of potential change is greatly restricted and unidirectional (i.e., ratings can only get worse).
- Can have significantly adverse consequences
 - Stigmatization of the inmate
 - Costs to society
 - Professional negativism

Shift to Dynamic Approach

- Static risk assessments tend to ignore clinical judgment and theoretically (vs. statistically) informed factors (i.e., *dynamic risk factors*).
- Antisocial → Prosocial Focus
 - Risk assessment has often focused on the precipitants of violence and identification of factors that increase risk.
 - More recently, however, attention has been devoted to identifying factors that promote desistance from violence (i.e., *protective factors*).

Further Defining Dynamic Risk

- According to several researchers, a dynamic risk factor is a variable that has been shown to meet *all* of the following criteria:
 1. Precede and increase the likelihood of violence
 2. Change with passage of time or through intervention
 3. When changed, they increase or decrease the likelihood of violence
- They are also sometimes referred to as *criminogenic needs*, since these factors could be identified and potentially targeted for treatment interventions.

Stable vs. Acute Factors

- *Stable dynamic factors* are relatively enduring problems. They're unlikely to change over short periods of time, but can change gradually (e.g., traits of impulsivity and antagonism).
- *Acute dynamic factors* are rapidly changing problems that could, in theory, fluctuate on a daily or hourly basis (e.g., alcohol/drug intoxication or emotional stressors).
- Depending on an individual's most important risk factors, this conceptualization could have significant implications, such as:
 - The frequency with which an individual's risk state should be assessed or monitored
 - Areas to assess in determining parole suitability (e.g., evidence of prolonged behavior change vs. adequate relapse prevention plans)

Examples of Dynamic Factors

Internal

- Impulsivity
- Negative/unstable affect
- Mental Disorder
- Antisocial attitudes
- Antagonism
- Substance abuse
- Rule/treatment noncompliance
- Coping/problem-solving deficits
- Lack of insight

Situational/External

- Conflictual relationships
- Association with criminal peers/gang involvement
- Employment issues
- Lack of resources/lack of access to services
- Inadequate living situation

Which Factors are Important?

- Not all studies have included the same risk factors or used the same assessment instruments.
- Many studies have focused on specific forms of violence (e.g., sexual offending).
- Some research has studied these factors at only one specified point of time, which does not provide information regarding the extent to which the variable changes.
- The relationship between a dynamic risk factor and violence may be complicated by the overlapping, moderating, or mediating effects of other variables.

Relationship to Violence Recidivism

Stronger Relationship

- Antisocial/offense-supportive attitudes*
- Hostile/dominant interpersonal style
- Peer groups
- Inadequate living situation
- Treatment noncompliance

Weaker Relationship

- Denial/rationalization of offense
- Deficits in insight
- Lack of remorse
- Lack of empathy for victims
- Low motivation for treatment

Relevancy of Dynamic Factors

- Relevant factors are those that are functionally related to the commission of violence for that *specific individual* in one of the following ways :
 - *Motivator*: Increases the perceived rewards or attractiveness of violence as a behavioral option (e.g., profit).
 - *Destabilizer*: Impairs the person's ability to monitor and control decision-making (e.g., impulsivity).
 - *Disinhibitor*: Decreases the perceived costs or negative consequences of violence (e.g., antisocial attitudes).
- By determining which risk factors are most relevant, we can develop hypotheses about what caused an individual to perpetrate violence and how best to prevent future violence.

Protective/Promotive Factors

- Most research has focused on identifying factors that, if present, make it *more* likely that someone will be violent.
- There is limited research into why an individual who is at risk for violent offending does *not* engage in violence (often termed successful desistance).
- Protective factors are characteristics of the inmate or his environment/situation that *decrease* the likelihood of that inmate committing violence.
 - They may also influence, improve, or alter how a person responds to the adversity that places them at risk for maladaptive outcomes (e.g., unstable social history).

Protective Factors Perspective

- Focusing solely on risk factors is likely to be experienced as disheartening by the inmate since the evaluator seems to attend only to negative/hard to change features.
- In contrast, inclusion of protective factors:
 - Attends to positives – factors whose presence is desirable
 - Attends more to the role of environmental factors
 - Increased focus on recent and future functioning
- More motivating for the inmate and encourages them to engage in behaviors that reflect these protective factors.

Examples of Protective Factors

- Few *static* protective factors have been identified.
 - Intelligence/academic achievement
 - Positive childhood attachment
- Most appear to be *dynamic* in nature.
 - Advanced age/maturity
 - Professional support/supervision
 - Positive social/emotional support
 - Structured group activities (e.g., leisure/education)
 - Coping abilities/sobriety/self-control
 - Stable employment/financial support
 - Stable accommodations/living circumstances
 - Realistic and prosocial long-term goals/plans

Variation in Operationalization

- Nothing more than the opposite end of the continuum of dynamic risk factors (e.g., self-control vs. impulsivity).
- Strengths or desistance-promoting factors that function independent of risk (e.g., involvement in religious activities). As the strength of the protective factor increases, the odds of recidivism decrease.
- Act as a buffer, interacting with risk factors (e.g., mitigating or weakening the effect of present risk factors). In this scenario, they have no direct effect on recidivism themselves.

Salience of Protective Factors

- The importance of any protective factor is unique to that *specific individual*.
- At least one study suggests that the relationship between protective factors and recidivism may change over time.
 - Social support and spare time spent with prosocial family/friends remained protective regardless of when the follow-up interview was conducted.
 - Having a place to stay was only protective for the first year following release, reflecting immediate needs of the parolee.
 - Working or being in training/education programs did not demonstrate immediate protective effects upon release, but appeared to be relevant for long-term protection.

Developing remorse/empathy?

- Most studies that have included these factors tended to focus on remorse or empathy related to *specific* crimes/victims.
- Changing overall distorted beliefs and attitudes related to potential victims (e.g., women), authority, and crime/violence is likely to have a greater effect on risk than remorse for any one incident.
- It has also been suggested that development of more empathic ways of relating to people, in general, may be more beneficial (e.g., better quality of interpersonal relationships) than empathy for certain victims.

Challenges to Dynamic Approach

- Stability of the factors
 - Dynamic risk and protective factors, by definition, change over time, resulting in an individual's violence risk fluctuating. This makes it more difficult to determine future violence risk with precision.
- More subjective than purely static assessments
 - Some have argued that ratings on dynamic factors may be affected by the importance the evaluator places on various aspects of change and their personal opinion of the inmate.

Challenges to Dynamic Approach

- Impression management
 - Some individuals are motivated to appear “overly positive” as a result of their circumstances (e.g., presenting before the BPH). These inmates may be selective or dishonest in the information he/she provides to appear to be a low risk, which poses an additional challenge to the evaluator.
- Incremental validity/effectiveness
 - Studies examining whether the ability to accurately determine violence risk potential improves as a result of including dynamic factors, over the use of static factors alone, have yielded mixed findings.

Critical Arguments

1. Are dynamic factors causally related to or simply correlates of violent offending?
2. To what extent do these factors change as a consequence of intervention?
3. Do changes in these factors actually lead to reductions in violent offending?

Questions about Causality

- General Aggression Model (GAM) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Klepfisz, Daffern, & Day, 2016)
 - Static and stable dynamic risk factors (features of the person) interact with acute/situational factors to increase one's propensity to violence by affecting cognition (e.g. activating aggressive thoughts/procriminal attitudes), changing affect (e.g. stimulating anger), and increasing physiological arousal.
 - This influences the person's appraisal of the situation and decision-making process, and without sufficient resources, an aggressive act is likely. With repeated "practice," aggressive schemas and personality styles develop.

Questions about Causality

- Propensities Model (Thornton, 2016; Ward & Beech, 2015)
 - Stable dynamic risk factors are best understood as enduring propensities (i.e., long-term vulnerabilities), which may be activated or exacerbated by acute risk factors (i.e., environmental/contextual triggers).
 - The likelihood of offending will depend on the extent to which the relevant propensities are currently active and whether the environment affords the opportunity for them to offend (e.g., a child molester in prison).
 - Hence, when the individual returns to a setting that provides the relevant triggers, a latent dynamic risk factor may re-activate and drive behavior.

Questions about Causality

- Evolutionary-Developmental Approach (Durrant, 2016)
 - Looks at interactions among biological, social, psychological, and cultural processes in relation to offending, as well as different developmental trajectories.
 - Example: Age and interpersonal relationships
 - Adolescence is a time when obtaining social status is important and intra-sexual competition and aggression is most likely. Investment in an intimate partner and offspring in adulthood signals a shift away from deviant peers and the mating effort, leading to desistance in offending.
 - Example: Unstable social history and impulsivity
 - Early exposure to harsh/unpredictable environments may signal to the child that the future will be similarly dangerous. As such, they may shift to a faster life trajectory with a focus on short-term immediate gains and unconcern for the harmful consequences of violent and antisocial behavior.

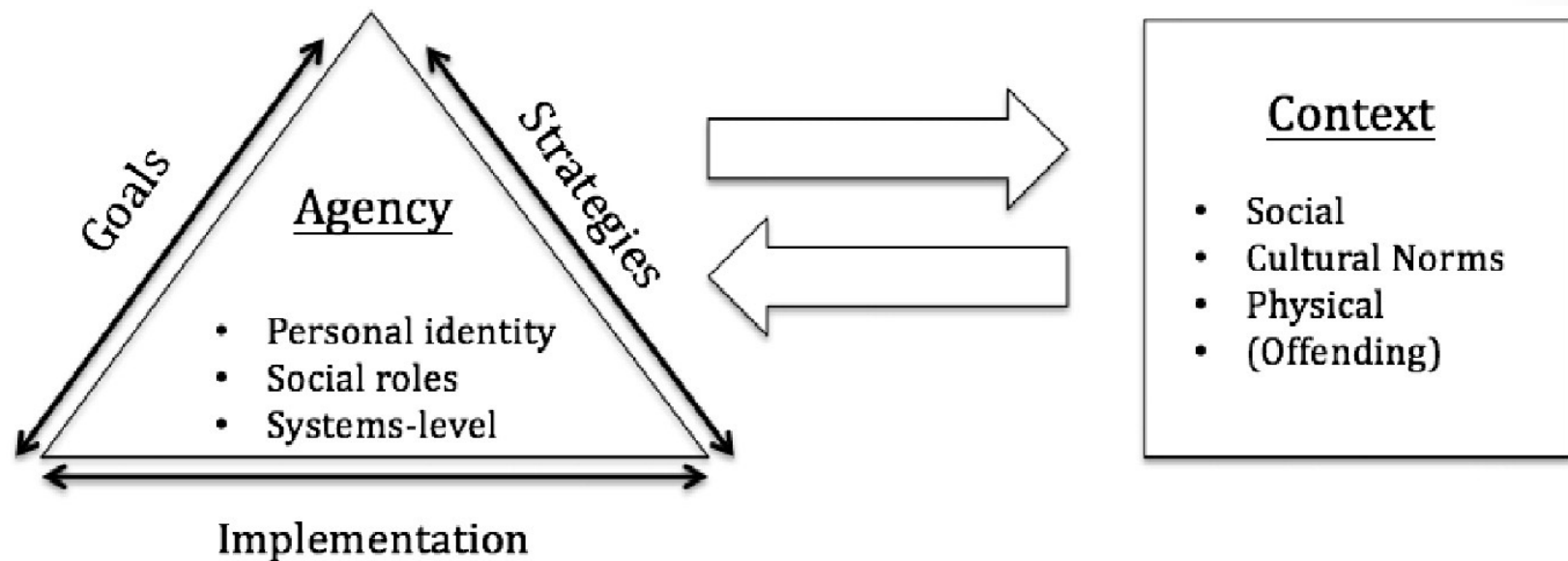
Role of Agency

- Why do some individuals select violent and criminal solutions rather than seeking prosocial and healthy alternatives?
 - Risk factors (e.g., financial hardship or access to substances) are unavoidable, but criminal action arises when a person *chooses* to engage in offending behavior.
 - Conversely, desistance occurs when an individual actively *chooses* an adaptive, functional, and non-criminal response in the face of an opportunity for violence/crime.
- Violent behavior can be better understood by incorporating two additional elements:
 - Sources of motivation (i.e., what the individual wants)
 - Goal-directed decision-making (i.e., how the individual believes he can successfully achieve what he wants)

Agency Model of Risk (AMR)

Heffernan & Ward (2015)

- Human beings engage in goal-directed behavior.
 - These goals are based on their personal identity (e.g., core beliefs and values), social factors (e.g., other's perceptions of them), and physical/biological needs.
- An individual's actions are influenced by context (e.g., dynamic risk factors).
 - This may be external resources, environment/setting, relationships, and personal vulnerabilities or propensities.
 - Dynamic risk factors impair normal functioning and are viewed as problems with agency. They act as mechanisms that weaken an individual's ability to act in a prosocial manner.



The Agency Model of Risk

Heffernan & Ward (2015)

Questions about Change

- Several studies indicate treatment interventions aimed at dynamic factors (i.e., criminogenic needs) are largely effective.
 - Results show improvement from pre- to post-treatment assessment in areas such as procriminal attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and education/employment.
- Studies have also demonstrated reduction in violent recidivism and improvement in dynamic factors across time (e.g., 1 to 3 years post-release), even after controlling for pre-treatment levels of risk.

Sustained Change

- When someone makes prosocial choices repeatedly over a period of years, development of internal/external resources supportive of prosocial behavior occurs.
 - Social networks will change, with inclusion of more individuals that condemn antisocial and violent behavior.
 - Decision-making schemas also change, making it more likely they will solve problems in a prosocial manner.
- Successful agency and engagement in desistance have been found to be key factors.
 - Desisting offenders significantly differ from those persisting in crime on several factors: self-efficacy (perception of competence), optimism (positive outcome expectancy), and hope (a sense of control over their future).

Sustained Change

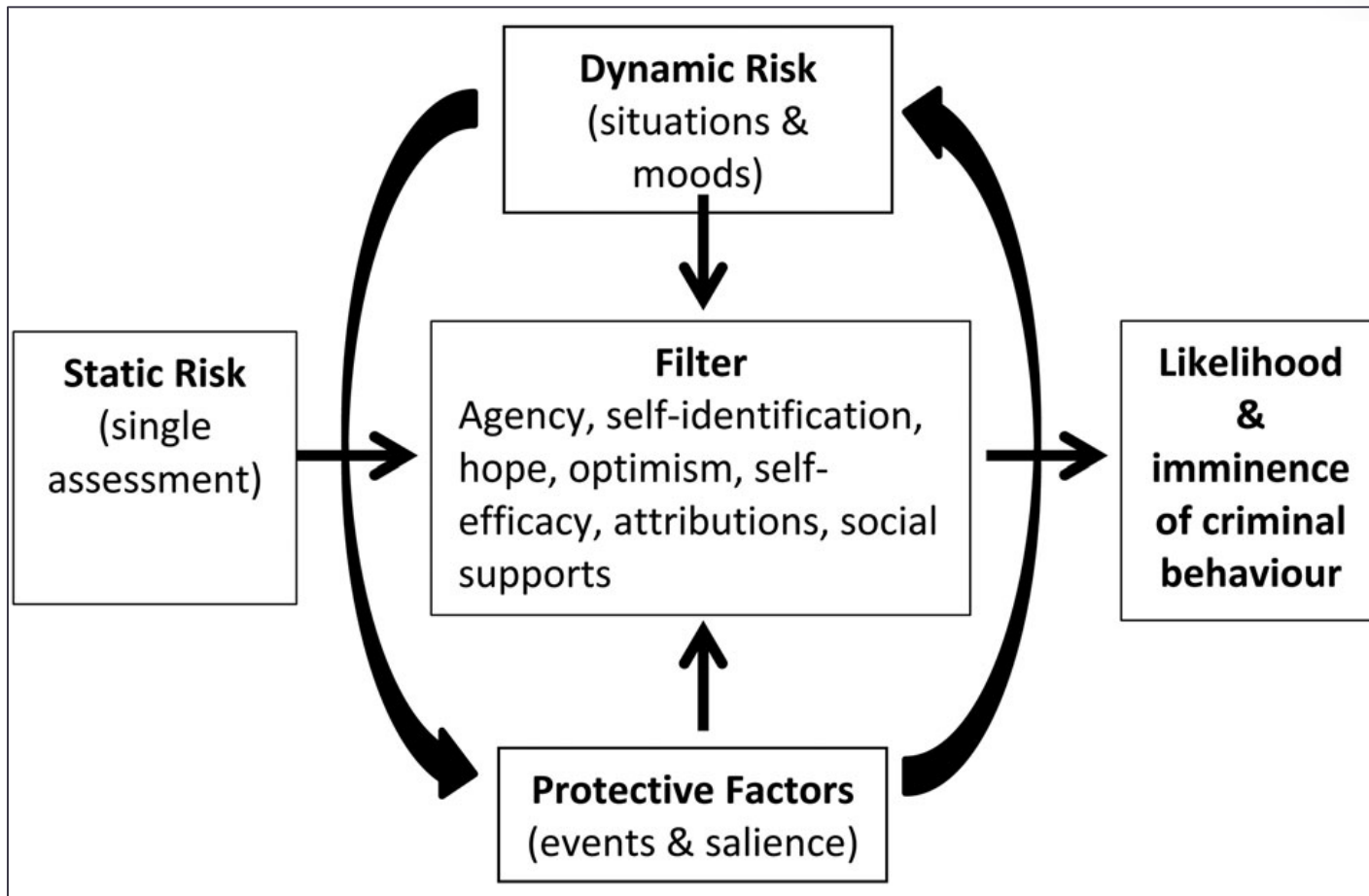
- Relapse Prevention Plans?
 - Development of motivation, gaining an understanding of what triggers the individual's long-term vulnerabilities, and learning the skills needed to manage these risk factors is more critical.
 - Reliably applying those skills when a risk factor is activated (e.g., engaging in self-regulation) may be even more important.
- Participation in Self-Help Programming?
 - Involvement in relevant treatment interventions may strengthen his/her protective factors, or provide the individual with “artificial” (or coached) protective factors to compensate for those that are under-developed or “missing” (e.g., structured problem-solving skills or learned ways of expressing feelings assertively).

Application to Life-Term Inmates

- Several issues arise in conducting risk assessments with lifers or long-term inmates (LTIs).
- Compared to the short-term inmates most violence risk research is conducted with, LTIs are...
 - Often convicted of more serious offenses, have less life experience in free society, and have fewer ties to an outside support network.
 - However, they are also generally older and closer to “aging out” of crime at the time of potential release, less likely to engage in institutional misbehavior, and have often removed themselves from antisocial peers.

Relevant Research with LTIs

- Poor financial status and substance abuse following release was significantly associated with general recidivism (but not necessarily violence).
- Placement in a prosocial, supportive environment and utilization of professional support (e.g., follow-up/maintenance programming) may be needed to maintain progress gained during institutional treatment.
- An individual sense of agency was the key factor distinguishing lifers who were successful on parole from those that persisted in criminal behavior.



Model of dynamic risk and protective factors impacting criminality

Serin, Chadwick, & Lloyd (2016)

Take-Home Points

- Incorporating dynamic risk and protective factors may increase the accuracy of risk assessments, and also helps identify useful and effective treatment targets for offenders.
- The dynamic risk factor consistently found to be most strongly associated with violent recidivism is antisocial or procriminal attitudes.
- The most important protective factors for desistance appear to be strong relationships with prosocial individuals, as well as adequate personal/professional support.
- A sense of agency and self-efficacy appear to play a key role in desistance from crime and violence.

FAD Approach

- There is currently no standardized measure specific to dynamic and protective factors that is a great fit for our purpose.
 - Most instruments have produced mixed results in terms of incremental validity, especially when used with LTIs.
- Nonetheless, our approach contains a risk instrument that evenly balances static/historic risk and dynamic risk.
- FAD psychologists also routinely consider and incorporate relevant and individualized protective factors, which may mitigate overall risk, during case conceptualization.